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ABSTRACT

This guide describes 10 important features of successful mentors' attitudes and styles, using data from an examination of 82 pairs of mentors and adolescents in Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring programs nationwide. The key reasons that certain mentoring relationships succeeded while others failed was related to the expectations and approaches of the mentors. Successful mentors understood that positive changes in the lives of young people would not happen quickly or automatically. If they were to happen at all, the mentor and youth had to meet long enough and often enough to build a relationship that helped the youth feel supported and safe, develop self-confidence and self-esteem, and see new possibilities in life. The 10 necessary features include: be a friend; have realistic goals and expectations; have fun together; give the mentee voice and choice in deciding on activities; be positive; let the mentee have much of the control over what the two of them talk about and how they talk about it; listen; respect the trust the mentee places in the mentor; remember that the mentor's relationship is with the youth, not with the youth's parents; and remember that the mentor is responsible for building the relationship. (SM)

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NATIONAL MENTORING CENTER

Technical Assistance Packet #4

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

ED 456 114

Building Relationships

A GUIDE FOR NEW MENTORS

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Building Relationships

A GUIDE FOR NEW MENTORS

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INTRODUCTION

What is a successful mentoring relationship? What are the qualities of an effective mentor? Volunteers come to mentoring programs because they want to make a difference in the lives of youth. But how does that happen? How are they able to make a difference?

Several years ago, Public/Private Ventures, a research organization in Philadelphia, set out to learn what helps successful mentoring relationships develop. They also wanted to understand why some mentoring relationships are not successful—why the mentor and youth do not meet regularly, why a friendship never develops between them, and why the pair breaks up.

The organization looked closely at 82 pairs of mentors and youth, ages 10 to 15, in Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring programs around the country. They interviewed each mentor and youth, and returned nine months later to interview them again. By then, 24 of the pairs had broken off their relationship, while 58 of the mentors and youth were still meeting.[1]

Why were some relationships doing so well while others had come apart? The key reasons had to do with the expectations and approach of the mentor. Most of the mentors in the relationships that failed had a belief that they should and could "reform" their mentee; and, even at the beginning of the match, they spent at least some of their time together pushing the mentee to change. Almost all of the mentors in the successful relationships believed that their role was to support the youth, to help him or her grow and develop. They saw themselves as a friend.

Those successful mentors understood that positive changes in the lives of young people do not happen quickly or automatically. If they are to happen at all, the mentor and youth must meet long enough and often enough to build a relationship that helps the youth feel supported and safe, develop self-confidence and self-esteem, and see new possibilities in life. Those mentors knew they had to:

- Take the time to build the relationship
- Become a trusted friend
- Always maintain that trust

While establishing a friendship may sound easy, it often is not. Adults and youth are separated by age and, in many cases, by background and culture. Even mentors with good instincts can stumble or be blocked by difficulties that arise from these differences. It takes time for youth to feel comfortable just talking to their mentor, and longer still before they feel comfortable enough to share a confidence. Learning to trust—especially for young people who already have been let down by adults in their lives—is a gradual process. Mentees cannot be expected to trust their mentors simply because program staff members have put them together. Developing a friendship requires skill and time.

[1] Morrow, K., & Styles, B. (1995). *Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures

What are the qualities of an effective mentor? This guide describes 10 important features of successful mentors' attitudes and styles.

1. **Be a friend.**
2. **Have realistic goals and expectations.**
3. **Have fun together.**
4. **Give your mentee voice and choice in deciding on activities.**
5. **Be positive.**
6. **Let your mentee have much of the control over what the two of you talk about—and how you talk about it.**
7. **Listen.**
8. **Respect the trust your mentee places in you.**
9. **Remember that your relationship is with the youth, not the youth's parent.**
10. **Remember that *you* are responsible for building the relationship.**

In the study of Big Brothers Big Sisters, mentors who took these approaches were the ones able to build a friendship and develop trust. They were the mentors who were ultimately able to make a difference in the lives of youth. The following pages say more about each of these characteristics of effective mentors. The pages are filled with the voices of the mentors and young people talking to you about their relationships and how they came to be.

1. BE A FRIEND.

Mentors are usually described as friends. But what does that mean? What makes someone a friend? One mentor talks about friendship this way:

> *I'm more a brother or a friend, I guess, than a parent or anything. That's the way I try to act and be with him. I don't want him to think—and I don't think he does—that I'm like a teacher or a parent or something. I don't want him to be uncomfortable, like I'm going to be there always looking over his shoulder and always there to report him for things he does wrong and that he tells me. I just want to be there as his friend to help him out.*

The reality is that mentors have a unique role in the lives of children and youth. They are *like* an ideal older sister or brother—someone who is a role model and can provide support and gentle guidance. They are *like* a peer, because they enjoy having fun with their mentee. But they aren't exactly either of these.

Sometimes it seems easier to talk about what mentors are by describing what they should not be:

- **Don't act like a parent.**
  One of the things your mentee will appreciate about you is that you are not his or her parent. However much they love their parents, young people might sometimes see them primarily as people who set rules and express disapproval. Youth need other adults in their lives, but they are unlikely to warm to a friendship with an unrelated adult who shows these parental characteristics.

  A mentor explains how he avoids acting like a parent:

  > *A couple of times his mom has said, well, you know, I was wondering if you could talk to Randy. He had some behavior problem in school. And I just said to Randy, "Hey, you know, what's going on?" and was just mostly light about it because it was nothing really major. You don't want to turn the kid off: Oh, you better this, this, and this. ... It's not a good idea to use the meetings for, "Well, if you don't do this then we don't meet" type of thing. That's like the worst thing you could do because then he's being punished twice. Because usually the mother has something else that she's done to punish him, you know, he's grounded or he can't watch television. And then for me to say, "Well, we're not going to meet because you don't know how to behave in school"—there's no real correlation to us meeting and him behaving in school.*

- **Don't try to be an authority figure.**
  It can be difficult for a youth to befriend an unknown adult. You want to help the relationship evolve into one of closeness and trust—but if you sound like you think you know everything and you tell your mentee what to do and how to act, you are likely ' jeopardize your ability to build that trust. If youth feel that they risk criticism when they talk to you about something personal, they are unlikely to open up to you.

A mentor talks about being a friend:

> *I remember being raised as a kid. I don't think kids respond well to being told, "I want you to do this or else." I think kids aren't going to respond to that. I think you have to let kids talk to you on their level, and when they feel comfortable enough. ... I said, "Look, if you ever want to talk about anything ... we'll talk about your father. ... If you ever want to say something, like that your mother makes you angry, I'm not going to tell her anything. I'll just sit here and listen."*

➤ **Don't preach about values.**

Don't try to transform the mentee. Take a "hands-off" approach when it comes to the explicit transmission of values. And especially, hold back opinions or beliefs that are in clear disagreement with those held by the youth's family. In general, young people do not like being told how they should think or behave—and they are uncomfortable if they feel that their family is being criticized. Preaching about values is likely to make it difficult for you to build a trusting relationship. Don't preach; instead teach—silently, by being a role model and setting an example.

A mentor describes the "hands-off" approach:

> *I would never correct her, you know. Because I just didn't think that was part of my function. I feel very strongly that it's not one person's place to try to change another person's values. My belief is that you cannot change other people. You can expose them to things and provide them with the opportunity to change, but you cannot, you cannot actually physically change them.*

➤ ***DO* focus on establishing a bond, a feeling of attachment, a sense of equality, and the mutual enjoyment of shared time.**

These are all important qualities of a friendship.

A youth talks about her mentor and friend:

> *Oh, it's fun because I never really had a sister. It's fun, it's someone that, you know, you can do things with besides your mother ... well, I don't really do anything with my mother because we have like two separate things. She goes to work, I go to school, she comes home and, you know, we're just there. We don't do anything. So this really gives me a chance to do something with somebody I really like.*

2. HAVE REALISTIC GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS.

What do you expect will change for your mentee as a result of his or her relationship with you? How will life be different? How will it feel different?

Strong mentoring relationships do lead to positive changes in youth. These changes tend to occur indirectly, as a result of the close and trusting relationship, and they often occur slowly. If you expect to transform your mentee's life after six months or a year of meetings, you are going to be frustrated. The rewards of mentoring are, most often, quieter and more subtle.

Mentors might have specific goals for their mentees. They might, for example, want the youth to attend school more regularly and earn better grades. They might want him or her to improve classroom behavior or get along better with peers. But these should not be the primary targets of your efforts. If they are—and if you spend your time together trying to direct your mentee toward these goals—you will just seem like another parent or teacher.

Developing a trusting relationship can take time and patience. You are unlikely to be able to achieve this trust if you approach the relationship with narrow, specific goals aimed at changing your mentee's behavior. Instead, you can:

- **Focus on the child or youth and his or her overall development.**
  Do not focus narrowly on performance and change.

  A mentor describes his goals for the relationship:

  > *I want to provide my mentee with some stability in his life. I mean I don't think he's had too much, just because of his family life and his mother's changing jobs a lot and sometimes she works days and sometimes she works nights. And I think it would help him just to have somebody there that's going to be there and help. Hopefully, I can provide different experiences for him too ... things like going to a professional basketball game or things where he can get out and see what's out there, because he doesn't get to do that much with his family. And simple things, like one of the first times we went out, we just went downtown to a park. And he'd never been there, and it's just right downtown, he lives just a mile from there, a few miles away from that. So it's just things like getting out and seeing things and knowing what's going on.*

- **Especially early on, center your goals on the relationship itself.**
  During the first months of meetings with your mentee, your primary goal should be to develop a consistent, trusting, and mutually satisfying relationship. You are very likely to find that you derive a sense of meaningful accomplishment from the relationship itself, from the growing closeness and trust.

  A mentor describes his satisfaction with the evolving relationship:

  > *He started to open up to me a little more. When we're together, he initiates a lot more conversation and stuff like that. ... And I guess it does feel like, as I wanted it to feel, more like a big brother/little brother relationship instead of*

me being an authoritarian figure. I don't want to feel like I'm here and I'm older than you, so whatever I say goes. I don't want it to be like that.

➤ **Throughout the relationship, emphasize friendship over performance.** A strong mentoring friendship provides youth with a sense of self-worth and the security of knowing that an adult is there to help, if asked. This friendship is central, and it is eventually likely to allow you to have some influence on your mentee's behavior and performance outside of the relationship. As your relationship becomes stronger and more established, your mentee may begin to approach you with requests for more direct advice or help. If and when your relationship reaches this stage, be sure to maintain a balance between attempts to influence the youth's behavior and your more primary goal of being a supportive presence. Keep the focus on your friendship.

A youth describes how his mentor's emphasis on performance has pushed him away:

Kids don't really want to, you know, listen to all that preaching and stuff. And then it's like: Are you done yet? Can I go now? I wouldn't mind getting some advice on girls, you know, maybe he can share a little bit of his knowledge. But I can't ask him about girls because he'd bring up school. I'd probably figure he would say, well, first of all you don't need to be worrying about girls right now, you need to worry about your grades, you know. I'm like, oh brother.

3. HAVE FUN TOGETHER.

Young people often say that the best thing about having a mentor is the chance to have fun—they have an adult friend with whom to share favorite activities. The opportunity to have fun is also one of the great benefits of being a mentor. However, for some mentors, fun might appear trivial in light of the scope and scale of unmet, pressing needs that may be present in the lives of their mentee. Thus, it is important to remember that fun is not trivial—for youth, having fun and sharing it with an attentive adult carry great weight and a meaning beyond a recreational outlet, a chance to "blow off steam," or an opportunity to play.

There are a number of reasons why you should focus on participating in activities with your mentee that are fun for both of you:

- **Many youth involved in mentoring programs have few opportunities for fun.** Having fun breaks monotony, provides time away from a tense home situation, or introduces them to experiences they would not otherwise have.

  A youth talks about life:

  > *My mom doesn't usually stay at our house, she usually stays with her boyfriend. So it's like, you know, what did you have kids for if you're not going to pay any attention to them or whatever?... But I just say, hey, my mom can do what she wants, I can stay home by myself, it don't really matter. I don't have very many people who stay with me. So I'm usually home by myself now. ... I used to go home, stay in my room, watch TV all day and never do nothing. And then when I started seeing my mentor, it's like, I don't know, I just changed. I like doing things now. ... You know, it's like I never got to do those kinds of things before.*

  A youth describes his enjoyment of new experiences:

  > *I get out of my neighborhood now and get to go places. ... I probably didn't see any movies before I had him, and I've seen about 100 movies now, which is fun because I was never in a movie theater before. That was exciting. ... He's kind of made it easier for me to get around to places, so I'm not stuck in the house all the time when no one's home.*

- **Having fun together shows your mentee that you are reliable and committed.** One mentor explains: "To get kids to where they know that you really care and can be trusted, you just have to spend time with them and do things that they like to do." The observation is a good one. Youth see the adult's interest in sharing fun as a sign that the mentor cares about them. They experience a growing sense of self-worth when their adult partner not only pays persistent, positive attention to them, but also willingly joins them in activities the youth describe as fun.

  A youth speaks about feeling cared for:

  > *I think everybody needs a mentor. I think it changes their life a whole lot for the better. ... With having someone I know that cares about me or that would rather, you know, have fun ... like going somewhere with me or have fun being*

with me, then I think a whole lot of people would feel better about their self and, you know, be more confident in their self.

Focusing on "fun" activities early in the relationship can lead to more "serious" activities later.

As your mentee comes to see you as a friend, he or she is likely to be far more receptive to spending some of your time together in activities that are less obviously fun, such as working on school-related assignments. Always be sure that these more "serious" activities are not forced upon the youth—that they are something your mentee seems agreeable to doing. Also be sure that activities such as schoolwork sessions are kept brief, and that they do not become the primary focus of your meetings together.

A mentor talks about waiting:

I wouldn't want to do it in the first year of the relationship ... just go to the library, and then Burger King, and then go home. I don't think that's fair to him. I just didn't think it was the right way to start off, especially if he's got behavioral problems and doesn't like school, and then on weekends I cart him off to the library. I don't think that's fun ... and it's one of my original objectives to let the kid be a kid again. But I think I can do it now [spend some time doing educational activities] because we've been together longer and I think he understands I'm trying to help.

A mentor describes how he keeps schoolwork in perspective:

I'd say we work on homework on the average, maybe every two to three weeks. It's not something to do every time because, quite frankly, I get sick of it too. ... When we meet, I usually let him give his input, and then depending on what our schedule is that day, I can kind of work with him a little bit. It's like, we get a negotiating thing going—we'll do homework for a half hour if we can play football for a half-hour.

And remember, it is always possible to weave educational moments—real-life learning—into the most "fun" activities. This is the kind of learning that youth tend to enjoy—it is learning with an immediate purpose and an immediate payoff—and they often don't even realize that they are learning. You can, for example, encourage your mentee to figure out the rules of new games, read road signs to help you figure out where you are going, or do the math to see if the two of you received the right amount of change for a purchase. One mentor discovered bowling. "Bowling is a great way to teach addition," she says. "You've got to count the pins and add the scores."

HAVING FUN TOGETHER

How do youth and mentors spend their time together? The particular activities can be almost anything. What is important is that the mentee play a role in deciding on the activity, and that it be fun. Here are a few suggestions:

- Play games
- Go to the movies and discuss what you see
- Play catch
- Hang out and talk
- Find interesting information on the Internet
- Watch TV and talk about what you see
- Eat at a restaurant
- Go bowling
- Shoot some hoops
- Go to a baseball or basketball game
- Go to a museum
- Read a book together
- Get involved in a community service project
- Write a story together
- Create artwork together
- Have a picnic
- Fly a kite
- Listen to music each of you enjoys
- Shop for food and cook a meal
- Walk around the mall
- Play chess
- Take photographs together
- Spend time together "doing nothing"
- Do homework (although only occasionally)
- Go to a concert
- Go to the library
- Do gardening together
- Do woodworking together
- Talk about your first job
- Give a tour of your current job
- Take a walk in the park
- Go bargain hunting
- Play miniature golf
- Talk about the future

4. GIVE YOUR MENTEE VOICE AND CHOICE IN DECIDING ON ACTIVITIES.

Be sure that your mentee is a partner in the process of deciding what activities you will do together. Giving your mentee voice and choice about activities will:

- Help build your friendship: It demonstrates that you value your mentee's ideas and input and that you care about and respect her or him.
- Help your mentee develop decisionmaking and negotiation skills.
- Help avoid the possibility that you will impose "it's-good-for-you" activities—like homework sessions—on your mentee without her or his agreement. This kind of imposition may make you seem more like a teacher or parent than a friend.

It might seem like it would be relatively easy to include your mentee in the decisionmaking process, but often it is not. Mentees might be reticent about suggesting activities because:

1) They don't want to seem rude.
A girl speaks about her belief that she should agree to everything:

Well, I never have said where I want to go. She makes plans for the day, and she asks if I want to go there. I can't say "no" because I think that would be sort of rude to say, "No, I don't want to go there."

A youth explains her reluctance to suggest activities:

Well, I think, you know, that she should be able to decide. She has the money and everything. ... I don't want to, I don't like to depend on people, like borrowing and all that stuff.

2) It really is difficult for them to come up with ideas.
Many youth in mentoring programs have had little opportunity to travel outside their neighborhoods and so do not know what the possibilities might be.

If it is difficult for your mentee to request activities or voice preferences, you can use these approaches to make it easier:

➤ **Give a range of choices concerning possible activities.**
Be sure the choices are youth-focused—be sure your mentee will enjoy the activities.

Mentors talk about presenting choices:

Most of the time, he wasn't really that forthcoming with ideas of what to do. We'd sort of negotiate, but it was more of me throwing out ideas and him either giving it the thumbs up or the thumbs down.

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Sometimes we go back and forth: oh you decide, no you decide—that type of thing. But I usually like him to decide because this is more for him than for me

as far as I'm concerned. So I, you know, I usually ask him what he wants to do and if he can't come up with something, I give him suggestions.

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I don't care what we do. I suggest ideas, but it has to be okay with my mentee because he's sort of the boss and these outings are for him.

➤ **Create an "idea file" together.**
One good activity to do together is to make a list of activities you would like to do in the future. You can write the list on a piece of paper (or on a computer and then print it out), or use index cards and write one idea on each card. This is a great strategy because the list or file will help both of you when you are looking for ideas about activities you can do together. Making an "idea file" together is also an important symbolic act—it reminds mentees that you care about their preferences and value their input.

A mentor talks about creating an "idea list":

Early on, we actually sat down and he made out a list of some things that he thought would be fun to do. I found that was helpful for me because that took some of the pressure off of me, you know, trying to say well, jeez, what am I going to do, what would a 10-year-old kid like to do, what are we going to do this week. But kids are so creative if you just put their minds to work. And he came up with a big list of more than 20 things, no problem.

➤ **Listen.**
You can learn a lot about what might capture your mentee's interest.

A mentor describes how he discovered what would be fun for his mentee:

At the beginning, in the feeling-out stage, it was like, "What do you like to do? What don't you like to do?" and just run through suggestions and listen. And I think listening is the key. If you find out that he talks a lot about hockey, well let's see if we can get to a game or try and find places you can ice skate. And if he talks a lot about these martial arts things or video games or something like that, you know, think about what kinds of things you can do with video games or with something that he tends to like a lot ... where there's still interaction between the two of you.

➤ **Emphasize to your mentee that her or his enjoyment is important to you.**
If your mentee is extremely reticent and you feel as though you are having to play the lead role in choosing activities, you can let him or her know you want the activities to be fun.

A mentor describes a simple act of reassurance:

When he can't decide, I suggest, but then every time I drop him off, I ask him, "Did you have fun? Because if you didn't, we'll do something else."

If you show through your words and actions that you value your mentee's input, she or he is likely to notice, appreciate, and respond. As one youth says: "I can suggest whatever and we'll usually do that, but I don't have too many ideas. Usually he'll have something planned, and he'll see if it sounds good to me and usually it sounds fine and we just do that ... because he usually thinks of things that are real fun."

A potential challenge:
Once young people are comfortable enough to request activities, they might make requests that are extravagant, such as frequent trips to amusement parks and adventure centers they have seen advertised on television or heard about from their friends. Even more modest requests—for movies, video arcades, or restaurants—can cost more than what you are comfortable paying, especially if the requests are made week after week.

To address this issue, you can:

- **Negotiate.**
  Particularly as your relationship develops, you are likely to find times when you and your mentee are negotiating about what activities you will do together. If you have a positive relationship, one where the mentee feels secure in your friendship and support, this negotiation can be a valued aspect of the relationship (particularly for teenagers) because it signals the presence of equality between the two of you.

  Youth talk about their enjoyment of negotiation:

  > *We both decide things. Like if I want to do something, he'll say "okay," and if he wants to do something, I'll either say "yes" or "no," or "I don't like that," or something. But we never turn each other down. ... Nothing ever came between us to not work out so well, we've been always working out things together, really nothing's been bothering us.*
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  > *That's the best thing right there ... because like if I want to do something and she'll want to do something else, like I'll say, "Okay we'll do yours this weekend," and then she'll say, "Okay, we can do yours next week." We compromise, that's the best word for it; we compromise ... and we both always end up having fun.*

- **Feel comfortable about setting clear limits on the amount of money you will spend.**
  Extravagant requests are typical for youth and especially understandable for youth who are poor. Take the requests in stride. You can negotiate with your mentee until the two of you find something that, while less costly, is still to the youth's liking. Your mentee will understand and will appreciate that her or his voice is still a factor in deciding on activities.

Mentors describe how they set limits on the amount of money they will spend:

He wants the extreme, he wants to buy everything. He thinks I'm rich, which, compared to him, I am. But he expects—doesn't expect, but he asks me for—a lot of things, and I'll always tell him no. But that's kids, you know, I'm not worried about that. It's no big deal.

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At an adventure center, after we went down there and did everything he wanted, I spent $50 easily. So last time we went, I told him, here's $20, that's it. And he brought some of his own money, so that added to it. We went to play video games and again the same thing—you can spend $5 or $6, which is not a lot of money, but I don't want him to think that every time he gets anything he wants, so I restrict it. I think last Friday night it was $4 and I told him that, and he understands that, and so he'll take his time and work with that.

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I think it's important to set a budget and to be up-front about what kind of money there is to spend, rather than it being sort of a vague thing. Because then you're kind of pulling strings a little bit and the kid's like, "Well you bought me popcorn last time. What's the deal here? Why isn't it forthcoming now?" I mean, I think there has to be some kind of rationale behind the money that's spent or something that they can sort of grab onto and understand rather than just kind of—I don't want it to be totally ambiguous.

5. BE POSITIVE.

People who feel negatively about themselves tend to live down to their own self-image. And youth who are matched with mentors usually have a number of situations in their lives that are leading them to feel exactly that way. They might, for example, have problems with a parent or sibling, difficulties in school, conflicts with peers, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. One of the most important things you can do as a mentor is to help your mentee develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Doing activities together provides many opportunities for you to encourage your mentee to feel good about himself or herself. You can:

- **Offer frequent expressions of direct confidence.**
  Praise and encouragement help build self-esteem.

  Youth explain the importance of encouragement:

  > *Every time she tells me you can do good at this or whatever, it makes me feel like she really cares and that I can really do it. If she thinks I can do it, I can do it.*

  o

  > *He's really a good person to talk to because he listens ... and he's a person, like, if I tell him I want to do something, he encourages me.*

- **Be encouraging even when talking about potentially troublesome topics, such as grades.**
  Be supportive; don't sound like you are criticizing.

  A mentor describes how he deals with bad grades:

  > *When I found out about a failing grade, I just said that's too bad. And I asked if there was any way I could help. ... Working on education is just stressing its importance, and then complimenting him, just trying to pick him up if he feels down.*

  A youth talks about the importance of support:

  > *Well, I got an F, and he said, man, you got any problems, you come to me and I'll help you with your schoolwork ... and we'll talk about it, and then we keep sitting there talking and stuff and it just makes me feel better.*

- **Offer concrete assistance.**
  At times, your activities might include helping your mentee with schoolwork, and this assistance should be given in a way that helps build his or her self-confidence.

  A mentor talks about helping:

  > *When he told me about a bad grade, I kind of focused on his other grades first—he said that he had done a good job with the other ones. And then I*

asked him if he wanted to do better in it, and then I kind of asked him how he could do better. And it was a pretty simple thing because he just didn't do a couple reports. So we decided that, you know, the next ones he got I would help him with them if he wanted. And we did that twice. ... It's like, what can we do together to help with this.

A youth talks about being helped:

When I did my maps in social studies, she helped me because I couldn't see it on the page real good. And she took my page and she put a typing piece of paper on it, and she clipped it with a paper clip on top of the page and she laid it down right on top of it, and I traced it. And she gave me some markers, pencils, and stuff. And every time I had a map, she took me over her house and every time I had a report—not every time, but when I had a report—she took me over her dorm and we typed it.

20 WAYS TO SAY "YOU'RE GREAT"

1. Terrific!
2. Great idea.
3. You did a great job.
4. I'm proud of you.
5. Fantastic!
6. You learned that fast!
7. I knew you could do it.
8. Keep trying—you'll get it.
9. Exactly right!
10. Nice going.
11. Outstanding!
12. Will you show me how to do that?
13. Way to go.
14. Perfect!
15. Wonderful!
16. You get better at this all the time.
17. I know what you mean.
18. I hear what you're saying.
19. That was beautiful.
20. EXCELLENT!

6. LET YOUR MENTEE HAVE MUCH OF THE CONTROL OVER WHAT THE TWO OF YOU TALK ABOUT—AND HOW YOU TALK ABOUT IT.

Along with doing enjoyable activities together, listening and talking are at the heart of your relationship with your mentee. The communication patterns you establish early on will be key to the relationship's development over time. Especially in the early, tentative phase of your relationship, your mentee should have a high degree of control over what the two of you talk about—it is important to respect the limits youth place on how much they choose to reveal about themselves. Take the time and effort necessary for your mentee to develop trust in you. While you know that your mentee should trust you, the reality is that you have to earn the trust.

Following these approaches can help you earn that trust.

➤ **Don't push.**
It should come as no surprise to you that your mentee, especially at first, may be shy and reluctant to talk, especially about difficult-to-reveal issues, such as problems in school or at home. Be careful not to push your mentee to discuss issues that she or he feels are too personal or might risk your disapproval.

Mentors talk about the importance of patience:

> *I knew that it was going to take her some time to loosen up, and you just can't force somebody to trust you. You can't force somebody not to be shy ... you have to just wait.*

○

> *I think he's still a bit shy in telling me things about, I don't know, I could see him possibly talking to me about things like with his dad, but the thing I keep remembering is that, you know, when I was 12, that was hard to talk about. I mean it's hard enough to talk about it now, let alone then. And I don't want to put that kind of pressure on him.*

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> *it really has taken a while for her to show, to demonstrate—and she's really not demonstrative in life—but she has really warmed up in the last few months and that's been just really lovely. She talks a lot more than she used to. And she talks spontaneously now, which really thrills me. And she tells me things spontaneously. It used to be I would always have to initiate the conversation. And now she really initiates a lot of conversations when we're driving in the car and tells me a lot of things. Like she even told me about a problem at home.*

○

> *He's a very quiet boy, and so he doesn't say a great deal about what's close to him. Only once in the year have we had what I would consider to be a conversation that he was a little more open about himself. It's not you don't have conversations about things that are serious ... he did talk about his father some, but not too much. He's just very quiet. My own opinion is that's not a great surprise to me that a 10-year-old boy would take almost a year to start*

talking about things like that, I mean at least a quiet one. He definitely more routinely now talks about personal things—I don't mean great traumatic problems, but he will mention his father or something like that from time to time. Neither one of us are idle chat people. We may well get in the car to drive home and not say anything till we get there. And I consider that to be perfectly natural, as does he.

➢ **Be sensitive and responsive to your mentee's cues.**
Follow your mentee's lead in determining what issues the two of you discuss and when.

Mentors talk about the importance of silence:

I wait for the invitation to give her advice on problems—I'm anxiously awaiting, but [laughter]. Once in a while, she'll ask, what do I think about something, and I'll tell her. But if she doesn't ask my opinion, I try to keep it to myself.

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When he doesn't talk and smile very much, then there's something really bugging him, and I just ask him is something bothering you ... and he says no. I say, you know you can blow off steam by talking to me if you want to. And he usually will—later.

o

You can tell sometimes they don't want to talk. She's very good sometimes when you get too close to home, changing the subject. That's what she'll do. And usually when she does that, I just let her do it.

➢ **Understand that young people vary in their styles of communicating and their habits of disclosure.**
Your own style of drawing out and supporting disclosure from your mentee may, to a large degree, determine the extent to which she or he feels comfortable speaking to you about personal issues. But remember that other factors will also influence your mentee's interest and ability in confiding. These factors include the youth's age, the amount of support available to her or him from other people, and cultural or family predisposition. Some youth open up only very slowly while some confide in their mentor just a few weeks or months into the match.

Youth explain their reticence:

I'm shy, you know, it's like I feel scared. I know I shouldn't be but I am, you know. I don't tell her because, I mean it's like I know she could give me advice. I know I could talk to her about anything, just like looking at her and knowing she's right there for me, like I feel better, you know, like she's my friend. But it's not the same way as like my mother or my brother could, because it's like they know most of my friends, and she doesn't. If she knew more of my friends, maybe I could talk more to her.

○

I just keep that stuff [a cousin's arrest for selling drugs] to myself. I don't go out and tell nobody my family business; it just stays in the family.

○

Well, you know, I just don't really like talking about myself. I'm just one of those strange people.

○

The first week, I was like real nervous and stuff; I didn't want to say anything. Then like the second and third week and stuff, I was real open to him. Just knowing him better made me feel like I could talk to him.

○

It's not that I don't trust her; it's just sometimes I don't have that much problems.

➤ **Be direct in letting your mentee know that she or he can confide in you without fear of judgment or exposure.**
Having a mentor is probably a new form of relationship for the youth, who thus does not know whether, and to what extent, she or he can trust you. Make deliberate attempts to let your mentee know that you are a safe person to talk to.

Mentors describe talking about trust:

The main thing at first was just gaining trust, that trust that she would confide to me, that was important first. I had to let her know that no matter what, she could tell me anything and I'd believe her and trust her and I'd support her. I think that's what these kids need. ... I think it just takes a long time to build up a trust. And she's always saying things like, don't tell my mom and don't tell your boyfriend. And I say, Amanda, what you tell me is between Amanda and me, nobody else's business.

○

I reiterate the point that you can tell me anything, that, you know, it's between you and me. I said, I'm not like your father. I said, I'm your brother; I'm like a big brother to you. And I said, I'm going to steer you away from something that's bad, and I said but I'm not your dad, I'm not going to punish you.

Youth explain how important these statements are to them:

One time we went to a pizza restaurant and we were sitting down and talking and she, you know, she was acting like a sister to me. She told me I could come to her with anything. Any problems that I had I could come and talk to her, you know, about anything, just be open with her.

○

When I first met him I didn't feel, you know, real, real comfortable talking to him about things. But then once he told me I could talk to him about everything, that made me feel better. I was more comfortable telling him stuff once he told me that. It felt good when I had something that I wanted to tell him, and he told me that he wouldn't tell anybody else. That made me feel pretty good because sometimes your friends say stuff like that but they tell people anyway.

➤ **Remember that the activities you do together can become a source of conversation.**

Whether you are playing catch together or enjoying a snack after seeing a movie, having a conversation about the activity itself can help your mentee become more comfortable talking to you. This, in turn, can ultimately help your mentee feel safe about making more personal disclosures.

Mentors talk about talking about activities:

My mentee is, as oftentimes the case with kids, a little quiet, but when we get involved in something, he'll refer to something like, oh this is something like we did in class or this is something like I've done before. And he'll bring up subjects, and then it gives me a chance to say something. Sometimes just sitting in the car we don't say much. I say, how's school? Fine. What's Mom doing today? Um, don't know. ... So you run out of conversation and when we get into our events or our programs, it gives a little more chance to communicate.

○

He's actually pretty quiet. It's funny, because he can shift from being extremely quiet and kind of reticent to just going a mile a minute on a topic. ... I wouldn't say it's easy for him to talk to me, but it's getting easier. As we have experienced more things together, then we have things to talk about—"Oh, remember we went to the IMAX theater," or "Wasn't that the place where we threw the frisbee?"

7. LISTEN.

When your mentee does begin to "open up" to you, how you respond will serve to either promote or discourage his or her ongoing disclosure. One of the most valuable things you can do is to just listen—it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of being a great listener.

- **"Just listening" gives mentees a chance to vent and lets them know that they can disclose personal matters to you without worrying about being criticized.**
  The process of venting can also help them gain insight into whatever is bothering them.

  Mentors talk about listening:

  > *He has talked about a teacher who recently gave him a bad grade. So basically, I just kind of listen to him sort of grouse about this teacher. And in the same sentence, he was saying he was going to clean up his act, too, because he had been like talking out. So I didn't really, I mean, I didn't really add too much.*
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  > *If he came to me about an argument with his mother, I would give him a chance to get it off his chest without giving him advice. ... I would let him talk it out. He might see where he was wrong. You know, I would just let him get it off his chest.*

- **When you listen, your mentee can see that you are a friend, not an authority figure.**
  Many youth appreciate being able to bring up issues and having an adult who responds primarily by listening. They recognize that listening is a form of emotional support, and they may have few other sources of support in their lives.

  Youth describe the feeling of being listened to:

  > *She's a great listener. I can tell her anything, and she just listens. And you can tell that she's listening and not like she's going, mm hm, mm hm, you know, like, "oh, yeah, what were you saying?" She listens and she goes, "I used to do that when I was little." And then like, you know, she tries to say don't worry about it. If you need to call me, call me. And she's like real supporting, so I really like her.*
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  > *I like it because there's no other man around the house and I like his personality and what we do and just talking to someone, just having someone to talk to besides your grandma. ... Because, before, when I got into fights with people and I didn't have any friends, then I had one, him, I had someone to talk to ... and he's always been nice and he always listens to me.*

8. RESPECT THE TRUST YOUR MENTEE PLACES IN YOU.

When your mentee does begin to talk to you about personal matters, be supportive. If you respond by lecturing or expressing disapproval, he or she is very likely to avoid mentioning personal matters in the future. Instead of seeking support and help from you, your mentee might become self-shielding by, for example, dodging conversations about problems and hiding school or family difficulties.

To demonstrate that you are supportive and nonjudgmental, you can:

- **Respond in ways that show you see your mentee's side of things.** This will encourage your mentee to continue sharing with you things that he or she might normally keep from an adult.

  A mentor talks about understanding his mentee's point of view:

  > *If he told me there was a teacher picking on him, I would try to listen to his story first and make him know that I believe his story. Because that's important with kids, especially adolescents. ... I think what happens is if you right away say, oh, you know, it's probably because you did this or you might have done that, then they don't think that you're on their side anymore and they put this wall up and forget it. You know, they don't want to tell you another thing. But if you give them the idea that you're in their corner, and even if you don't agree with what they did, you're still in their corner, they'll understand they can keep telling you things.*

  A youth talks about feeling understood:

  > *Like if you get in trouble, if you can't talk to your mother, you can always go to your mentor and work things out, too, because I know he'll listen to me ... because I can tell when my mentor listens to me because he understands what I'm saying. And like we can be face-to-face and he'll say, well, he'd been through it too when he was young.*

- **Reassure your mentee that you will be there for him or her.** Some youth may be reluctant to disclose things about themselves because they worry that their mentor will disapprove of them and, as a result, disappear from their lives. This is a reasonable fear for youth who have an absent parent and may feel responsible for the parent's leaving—youth often believe that they did something to drive the parent away.

  A mentor speaks about providing reassurance:

  > *He does confide in me quite a bit. More than I thought he would because there's a lot of trouble and he's got in fights and such and suspended from school. One time we were just talking and we were over at my house playing basketball and he was having a good time. And then I think sort of in the middle ... things seemed to sort of go downhill for him. I think he realized that he may have done something that I may have thought less of him for—I think he got in a fight that time and was suspended. Anyway, I told him that I*

was in this relationship for a long time, and he just broke out and smiled. I think he felt, well I really goofed now—this guy isn't going to like me, and I just happened to say the right thing. And I really meant it—and I didn't know how to get that across so I just told him, I said, I'd like to, you know, I'm interested to see you when you're 25 years old or something; and he's 15 right now. So that to him, you know, meant probably a lifetime.

➤ **If you give advice, give it sparingly.**
A mentor's ability to give advice will occur at different times and to varying degrees in relationships, depending upon the mentee's receptivity and needs. In every case, though, do not let advice-giving overshadow other ways of interacting and other types of conversation.

Mentors speak about keeping the focus on friendship:

It's been more of a fun relationship than anything. As far as advising him about anything, you know, maybe there'll be a one-shot advice thing here or there, but it's not anything that we dwell on for anything more than 30 seconds or less ... not anything like, "Well, Marcus, I really think that this is important and we should really work on it together."

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If we're doing something kind of fun, throwing the frisbee, going to a movie, or something like that, I might give a little advice about something. It's more a friend kind of thing. ... I don't want to make this some kind of lecture series: "Saturday afternoon lectures with Joe."

➤ **If you give advice, be sure it is focused on identifying solutions.**
The situations for which youth most commonly seek advice tend to involve arguments at home, struggles at school, and problems with friends. If your mentee asks you for advice, he or she is most likely looking for help with arriving at practical solutions for dealing with the problem.

A youth talks about getting helpful advice:

One time, these three boys at school wanted to fight me, and my mentor helped me. ... I forgot what he said, but he told me something that was good ... and I told my mom and she said it was a good idea, and I told my grandmother and she said it was a good idea, too.

➤ **If, on occasion, you feel you have to convey concern or displeasure, do so in a way that also conveys reassurance and acceptance.**
As your relationship develops into one of closeness and trust, there might be times when your mentee discloses something to you that causes real concern. As a supportive adult friend, you may be able to express that concern—but deliver your message in a way that also shows understanding.

A mentor describes how he responded when he learned his mentee was suspended from school:

> *He's just looking for himself right now and, you know, that's what I told him. I said, "I can identify with that. I'm not saying you're right; I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying I know where you're coming from. But I'll just tell you in the long run, you're the one that's going to be hurt by this." He needs a lot of strokes. I provide them. I tell him he's a good kid and you're smarter than that. You don't browbeat him, you try to lift him up.*

➤ **Sound like a friend, not like a parent.**
Youth have a keen ear for the difference.

Youth speak about what their mentors sound like:

> *He doesn't lecture me a lot. We more like goof around and talk about funny stuff. He doesn't give me, like, you shouldn't be doing this or that and the other. ... I think he would probably give me advice the way a friend would talk to me about it. Like I think he would say like, well, try not to do that again because you might get in trouble, something like that. A lecture would be more like treating me like a little kid.*
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> *Yeah, it's not like a parent lecture, so I guess it's cool. It's like you sit there and your mom's like bawling you out and you're like yeah, you know, you're sitting there and you're not really listening to her, you're kind of like zoning out, you know. And every time she's like, boom, oh yeah. You just sit there and she's like babbling on, like yeah. But with your mentor, it's like when you're talking to your friends and they're cranking on you, right, it's like yeah, I know, man, I gotta do this and I gotta get my act together. So it doesn't really bother me.*

9. REMEMBER THAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP IS WITH THE YOUTH, NOT THE YOUTH'S PARENT.

If you pick up your mentee at her or his home for your meetings together, you will inevitably have some interaction with parents and other family members. Many mentors in this situation have found that it can be a considerable challenge to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries between themselves and the family. And even if you meet with your mentee at a school or other location that is set by the program where you volunteer—which means you might not have any *direct* contact with the parents—your mentee will probably, at times, talk about his or her family. Even in this less direct situation, there are family boundaries you should be careful not to cross.

A mentor's relationship with the youth's family can be a crucial factor in determining the success of a match. It could affect whether your mentee perceives the relationship as meaningful and sees you as a reliable ally and, ultimately, whether you and your mentee meet frequently and over a long period of time. It is essential that you not become involved in family issues.

In some cases, problems may be initiated by the mentee's family. For example, family members might try to involve the mentor in family disputes, draw the mentor into providing discipline to the youth, or attempt to have the mentor help in providing basic supports for the youth, such as clothing. In other cases, the mentor might cause problems by not respecting family boundaries. Mentors might, for example, observe or hear of situations that they view as neglectful or damaging parenting and want to intervene directly because they believe it will help the youth.

Crossing any of these family boundaries can negatively affect your ability to develop and maintain a supportive and trusting relationship with your mentee. To avoid being drawn into family tensions, and to ensure that you do not intrude yourself into the family, you should:

➤ **Maintain cordial but distant contact with family members.**
Be friendly and polite. But keep to a minimum the amount of time you spend in conversation with them about the youth or about other family members. Try just to talk about activities you and your mentee are doing together, or keep the discussions in the area of general "chatting."

A mentor talks about maintaining distance:

> *I guess I talk to his mother almost every week because I wind up seeing her. Like this morning, she bowls over here so I picked him up at the bowling alley and she's usually there too. What we talk about is just pretty much she'll ask me, "What are you guys going to do today and when are you going to be home," so she knows ... that sort of thing. But on occasion, if he's still bowling or something like that, the last five or 10 minutes, we just kind of chat.*

A youth talks about her mentor and her mother:

> *When my mentor talks to my mom, it's well, you know, come in, because like I'll not be totally ready. And they say hi, how you doing, you know. Oh, so you're going to be doing this today, oh okay, that kind of a thing. I mean I don't think that they're supposed to really be talking, because it's just for me and her, you know, not my mom.*

➤ **Keep your primary focus on the youth.**
Refrain from developing relationships with other members of your mentee's family—they would compete with your relationship with your mentee.

Mentors talk about attempts of family members to intrude:

> *When we were first matched, her mom wanted to come along. She went about it in a roundabout way. She would say, well they're having this, that, or the other thing, and I was wondering if we could all go and that kind of thing. So it became very hard for me, you know. She would volunteer to get tickets to the circus; that was one of the things. So her mom and her sister and Lisa and I went to the circus, but all the attention was on all the other family members and Lisa just sort of faded into the background.*

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> *Whenever I went to pick up Jackie, the mom got in on the conversations, was nagging her while we were talking, interrupting us, and kept trying to shift the focus onto her. I think she's one of these really needy people that needs attention so she's trying to get it from wherever she can.*

➤ **Resist families' efforts to extract help beyond providing a friendship for the youth.**
Do not allow your mentee's parent to influence you into disciplining the youth or lecturing your mentee about his or her behavior at home or school. In joining with the parent in this way, you would be taking on a parental role yourself. In addition, do not allow family members to draw you into their problems or disputes. Similarly, resist any desire you might have to intervene with the family. If there is a problem in the family that seems to require outside services, contact program staff so they can deal with the issue. Also, do not hesitate to contact program staff about any difficulties you are having with the family and to ask them to talk to the family about your role.

A mentor describes turning to program staff for help:

> *I had to contact my caseworker because there was just too much tension and I couldn't deal with it anymore. And I said, "You know, we need to address this issue and get this thing out in the air. It's probably better that you deal with it." And you know, once she talked to the mom everything was a lot better. I mean because every time I'd come I could sense friction. I don't like to feel uncomfortable that way.*

➤ **Be nonjudgmental about the family.**
Both in interactions with your mentee's family and in conversations with your mentee about them, do not be judgmental. If your mentee complains or vents about his or her parents, provide support and, if appropriate, help your mentee find ways to deal with the problems, but refrain from commenting in ways that disparage the youth's family. Finding a response that simultaneously conveys understanding of your mentee's difficulties with parents, and implies little or no criticism, can be a challenge. But criticizing a parent—

even if you believe you are only agreeing with the youth's criticism—puts your mentee in an awkward and embarrassing position. The key is to listen without judgment and to assure the youth of your empathy and caring.

Mentors talk about being careful not to criticize parents:

> *When she gives me information about her mother, I have a hard time discussing it with her, only because of the fact that I can't put her mother down, because that's not right, as well as I don't have a lot of knowledge in that type of environment or that type of situation that her mother is going through. So it's more of a listening and trying to draw out from her how she feels.*
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> *A couple of times, I picked her up and she's just been with her mom on the weekend, it's been a bad weekend, you know, real bad. She'll be, you know, I have to talk her through it. And that's hard to do without saying horrible things about her mother. Plus I get her dad calling and saying horrible things about the mother, and I'm like, look, that's not my job. And I can't say anything bad about her mom, I can't.*

Finally, do not talk to the family about anything your mentee has disclosed to you—and do not talk to your mentee about things that family members might say about her or him. Remaining outside of the family—and outside of the family dynamics—is essential if you are going to protect your mentee's trust in you and be able to provide support.

10. REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP.

Building a relationship cannot be rushed. During the early period, when you and your mentee are getting to know one another, you may have to be particularly patient and persistent as you work to establish the foundation of a meaningful friendship, one that could ultimately help lead to positive changes in your mentee's life. At first, the relationship might seem one-sided—you might feel like you are putting out all the effort while your mentee seems passive or indifferent. Remember that this is the time when young people are going to be at their shyest and most reticent, because they do not yet know you. It is also the time when they may be testing you, because they could have limited reason to believe that adults can, in fact, be reliable and trustworthy.

To help build, and then maintain, the foundation of a trusting relationship, you should:

- **Take responsibility for making and maintaining contact.**
  Having regular meetings with your mentee is essential if you are going to be able to develop a strong relationship. You are the adult and must be responsible for being sure that the two of you meet regularly. If you are meeting with your mentee on a pre-arranged schedule at a school or other designated location, maintaining contact might not be a problem. But if you are in a program where you and your mentee schedule each meeting, decide where you will meet and what you will do together, you may find that your mentee does not return phone calls or behaves in other ways that make it difficult to schedule meetings. If you expect the youth to contact you, it is very likely you are going to feel disappointed and frustrated, and it also means that you very likely will not be meeting consistently. Be understanding—consider the situation from your mentee's point of view.

  A mentor describes the early months:

  > *It was basically me initiating a lot of the calls, which I have no problem with. That doesn't bother me because I know how kids are when it comes to that kind of stuff.*

  As your relationship develops, your mentee might, at times, initiate contact—and that could be one indication that your relationship has evolved into a real friendship.

- **Understand that the feedback and reassurance characteristic of adult-to-adult relationships is often beyond the capacity of youth.**
  At times, some mentors feel unappreciated because they get little or no positive feedback from their mentee. They may interpret this as meaning that their mentee does not care about seeing them. But the fact that youth are reticent does not mean they are indifferent.

  A mentor describes her frustration and understanding:

  > *One time that was kind of strained was when we were going to make tie-dye stuff and so we went to Target and got a bunch of plain t-shirts and a bunch of plain socks and went over to my house and, you know, we were doing it*

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> *and it was fun, but she just never talked. So it was just kind of like, okay, you know, it was frustrating. But I didn't say anything about it. I mean I knew that it was going to take her some time to loosen up and you just can't force somebody to trust you, and you can't force somebody not to be shy—you have to just wait. It's kind of a grown-up thing to be able to say, "Gee, I really appreciate that." Because in a way, you know, when you're a kid you kind of expect it, which is fine.*

In some cases, mentors talk to program staff to find out how the youth feels about the relationship and to get reassurance that the youth is enjoying their time together.

And in all cases, mentors can allow themselves to recognize and appreciate the quiet moments that indicate they are making a difference. As one mentor explains: "You know, Lisa being Lisa, you don't get that feedback in words, but you drive up and the kid is standing there and as soon as she sees you, she smiles."

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SOME QUESTIONS

1. Think about yourself when you were the same age as your mentee. Was there an adult (other than a parent) whom you especially enjoyed spending time with? What were the qualities of that person that made him or her special to you?

2. What are three or four qualities you have that are going to help you be a great mentor?

3. Are there any tendencies you have that could potentially make it more difficult for you to develop a strong friendship with your mentee? (For example, do you like to talk a lot more than you like to listen?) What will you do to overcome those tendencies?

4. Think about the moment when you are going to meet your mentee for the first time. How do you think she or he will feel? What do you imagine she or he will be thinking?

5. Imagine you have just told an acquaintance that you have become a mentor. That person says to you, "What is a mentor?" What would you say? How would you describe your role?

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